Winning Elims

Every year, there is a handful of debaters who keep dropping in big rounds. What decides the winner or loser in these rounds is not usually basic issues. When both debaters understand technical aspects, what decides those rounds?

Clarity: It is one of the most fundamental aspects of communication, yet debaters often overlook it.

1. Signpost your framework. Unlabeled blippy spikes only create confusion. In addition to signposting, articulate the implications of arguments.
2. Divide your line-by-line and your off-case arguments. Any generic disadvantages or turns on the Affirmative case should be read as off-case so you can apply them much more liberally to weigh and respond. This also sets up an independent, stand-alone voting issue and communicates that it is a big reason to Negate. If you’re reading evidence in refuting the 1AC, understand the impacts on the flow.
3. Speed is good, but there are many issues with how it is used. Don’t speed through a list of blippy arguments. Do read quickly through evidence. The judge can always call for cards at the end of the round. If you’re making very specific distinctions in your framework, do not go quickly.
4. The pitfalls of cross-applications. First, cross-applications can be problematic because links between arguments may be unclear to your judge. Second, judges have to look all over the flow to cross-apply the argument.
5. Be very careful about bouncing around the flow in the 1AR. Only bounce around as necessary. Also, give your judge time to transition between parts of the flow.

Use the ballot as your guide: Two tests to your arguments.

1. Extendability: Of the arguments you’re making in the 1NC/1NR, how many can you extend and go for hard to win the debate? Also, in the 1AC,
2. Comfortability: Will the judge feel comfortable voting on this argument?

Showmanship:

1. Act like you want to be there. Chances are your judge doesn’t want to be judging, so you need to make them engaged. Energy is infectious. Inject caffeine into your body if you need to.
2. Act like you respect your judge and your opponent. You don’t need to like them, but there needs to be a measure of respect for other people in the round.
3. Act like you think you’re going to win. If you act like you think you will lose, do the judge a favor, and don’t show up. Don’t just go through the motions. Judges pick up on confidence.
4. Act like you’ve been there before. Judges will think you’re a newbie if you don’t.
5. Humor: Debaters who try to be funny and fail can make the entire room laugh, but others who are naturally funny can exploit the skill.
6. Style and reputation: You don’t get to have a style until you have a reputation. Don’t do quirky things unless people acknowledge that you’re good. Some annoying are not looking up during rebuttals, making repetitive arguments, doing things you saw someone else do in elims, seeming disorganized, making the judge wait during your actual speech, acting too confident when you’re losing, acting too buddy-buddy with the judge, acting like something’s the judge’s fault, and acting like a bad policy debater.
7. There is no substitute for pre-tournament prep. Have files prepared so that you don’t waste prep time. Have multiple cases prepared.

Evasiveness: Relies on your opponent’s making a mistake.

1. How debaters are evasive: They use theory to avoid answering a position, they use spikes to preclude arguments, they hide issues, and they avoid answering questions in cross examination.
2. What to do instead: Engage your opponent’s arguments and engage them substantively. Compare your arguments to theirs in weight. Give your opponent’s some benefit of the doubt.

Controlling the issues:

1. You control issues in the round by inserting them yourself.
2. It is more important for you to determine what will become an important argument than to win every single argument.
3. Direct attention to issues in cross examination.
4. If an issue is important, spend time on it.

Cross examination:

1. Do not just go down the flow and clarify things.
2. Keep it business. Don’t lose your cool, and don’t get too chummy with your opponent. Don’t show what you are really thinking or feeling. Use non-verbal communication selectively.
3. Don’t get too sucked into flex prep. The only thing worse than listening to three minutes of cross examination is listening to seven minutes of bad cross examination.

Get smarter:

1. Learn to read more efficiently. You should know more about the topic than your judges. They shouldn’t be teaching you after the round.
2. There aren’t any magical shortcuts. Either stop caring or start doing work. Debate is a matter of will, not only a matter of skill.